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American Weapons To Boost Capability Of Ukraine F-16 Jets

 BY LARA SELIGMAN
AND ALISTAIR MACDONALD

WASHINGTON—The U.S. has agreed to arm dozens of F-16 jet fighters being sent to Ukraine with American-made missiles and other advanced weapons, addressing a long-standing question about the Western aircraft.

Denmark and the Netherlands are preparing to send the first American-made F-16s to Ukraine this summer, and more will come later from Belgium and Norway. But until now, the source of critical weapons for the planes has

been unresolved.

Though the Pentagon has limited inventory and production capability, it will supply the F-16s with air-to-ground munitions, precision-guidance kits for bombs and advanced air-to-air missiles in sufficient quantities to meet Kyiv's most urgent needs in its war with Russia, a senior U.S. official said.

"We are confident that we will be able to supply all of those [weapons], at least the critical volumes that they need," the U.S. official said.

The F-16 is one of the highest-profile pieces of equipment

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ment the West has offered Ukraine as it seeks to turn the tide in a war that has been reduced to incremental battlefield gains. Both the Ukrainians and the countries donating the aircraft say the F-16s will bolster Kyiv's military forces, but acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead in training enough pilots, maintaining the aircraft and determining how best to use them.

"It's an important addition," said Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs Espen Barth Eide. "It's not in itself changing the war."

The weapons for the F-16 that the U.S. is sending include AGM-88 HARM air-to-ground missiles; the extended-range versions of Joint Direct Attack Munition kits, which convert unguided bombs to smart weapons; and so-called small diameter bombs that explode

with a tight blast radius. In addition, the U.S. will send advanced midrange air-to-air missiles, known as AMRAAM, and AIM-9X short-range air-to-air missiles for the jets.

"The aircraft itself is worthless without the weapons," said Maj. Gen. Rolf Folland, chief of the Royal Norwegian Air Force.

In Europe, many countries were reluctant to send large amounts of their limited inventory of air-launched munitions to Kyiv, so the allies came up with a solution that the Pentagon has dubbed "jump-start." European countries can pool their finances to buy air-launched weapons from the U.S. to send to Ukraine, the U.S. official said.

But arming the F-16s is just one of many challenges facing the Ukrainians when they receive the aircraft. The aircraft, which will eventually number about 80, won't be delivered all at once. Denmark's, for instance, will come in stages over eight months.

Ukrainian officials have expressed gratitude to allies for providing the jets, but have complained privately that their arrival, like much Western aid, comes too late, in too



Ukraine will receive the first of 80 F-16s this summer.

small a number and with too many restrictions to alter the war substantially.

Once the jets arrive, the next hurdle will be to ensure there are enough pilots and maintainers to operate them.

Training for F-16s has been a convoluted process conducted across several countries. Some Ukrainian pilots started their English-language training in the U.K. and France, two countries that have never flown the F-16. The flight training is taking place in the U.S., Romania and Denmark, but the Danish facility is shutting down this fall to transition

to training on the advanced F-35 combat jets that will replace the country's F-16s.

Ukrainian officials have pressed for more aircraft as soon as possible and for the U.S. to expand the training pipeline. But the number of Ukrainian pilots available to begin the training has been a significant limiting factor to how many aircraft can be sent, U.S. and Western officials said.

The Ukrainians will need to have a steady supply for spare parts to service the jets, something that bedeviled other donations of Western weapons, from howitzers to tanks.

The current plan is for Ukrainians, who are training to service the jets, to do most of the maintenance in-country. Higher-level work such as engine maintenance will initially need to be done abroad, a Pentagon official said.

Once the pilot-training pipeline and maintenance workflow is figured out, there is still a significant risk in flying the aircraft into combat, especially because Ukrainian pilots are used to flying Soviet jets.

A Danish F-16 pilot would typically take more than four years to fully train. Ukrainian pilots have spent around one year, a person familiar with the matter said.

And unlike American F-16 pilots, who normally spend at least a year with their unit before deploying, "these guys are going to go directly into combat," the U.S. official said of the Ukrainians.

It is also unclear how the F-16s will be used against Russian forces. Washington will limit Ukraine's use of the U.S.-provided weapons to strike Russian territory, as it has with other weapons, the U.S. official said. Kyiv will only be permitted to use them on Russian territory in response to

attacks from across the border.

A senior Western intelligence official said the F-16s would likely take time to integrate into Ukraine's armed forces, and it may be months before they have an impact on the battlefield.

Ukraine wants to use them to fly to the border and shoot into Russia, but that tactic isn't realistic in the current environment, the U.S. official said, because of the threat from Russian surface-to-air missiles.

U.S. officials say the most effective use of the F-16s in Ukraine is in what is called close-air support, or taking out ground threats to troops on the front lines. Europeans, on the other hand, say the F-16s can be used for air defense and to potentially help push Moscow's air force farther from the front line, where its aircraft are releasing thousands of so-called glide bombs each month to devastating effect.

"It will not be a silver bullet," said Norway's Folland. "But if you have F-16s with long range weapons, you will push the Russian air force further away and that is the most important thing."

—Doug Cameron and Daniel Michaels contributed to this article.